

Music to make your 'intestines rumble'

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FREDERICTON - Michael Forbes wants to let the world know what the tuba can do.

"There are many preconceived notions about the tuba," said Forbes, who makes up one-fourth of Sotto Voce, an internationally renowned tuba quartet.

"Our role (as tubists) is primarily to sit in the back of an orchestra or the bottom of a band, and support an ensemble in an accompanying role. Occasionally, we'll get a solo."

But at this weekend's Fredericton International TubaFest, where Sotto Voce are this year's clinicians, low brass instruments are getting a much-deserved starring role.

The two-day seminar, organized by University of New Brunswick professor and amateur tubist Richard Riding, gives players of all skill levels an opportunity to meet and explore the finer points of their instrument.

"There's so few of us," Riding said.

"Every band only has one. You don't really have a chance to interact that much with other low brass players."

The chance to meet other tubists drew 20 participants from Halifax, Maine, and as far as Ontario.

"I would have come to wherever this occurred, because there's nothing else available anywhere," said Janice Lessard, who flew in from Toronto for the festival. "This is it. This is a biggie."

Lessard plays the euphonium, a smaller and higher instrument closely related to the tuba and named for the Greek phrase for "beautiful sound."

"They're often called the baby of the tuba family," Lessard said.

The event kicked off Friday morning and featured clinics on different technical aspects of playing the instrument, as well as one-on-one training sessions.

"This isn't just people having a good time playing together – this is a highly instructional event with high-calibre, professional musicians," said Lessard.

"To go somewhere to improve your playing while at the same time having fun – my experience is that there's less and less of that available all the time."

That specialized level of instruction will allow tubists to explore the range of their instrument, and to step away from the tuba's usual role of providing a bass line or an oom-pah back beat by creating complex music together.

"It might seem that this is going to be extremely low, muddy, kind of murky music," Forbes said of all-tuba ensembles.

In fact, Forbes said, the tuba can have a range of almost seven octaves.

Adds Riding: "The top is really just limited by your stream of air, and what you can do with it."

The first TubaFest was held in 2004 after Riding, who has attended several tuba conferences, decided to create an event closer to home. The seminar soon evolved into an annual two-day festival.

Sotto Voce, who met as students at the University of Missouri and play everything from Bach to Frank Zappa, were invited to host this year's clinics after Riding saw them play at a conference in Regina.

Forbes estimates that there's usually only about three to five active conferences for tubists in North America.

"Most festivals that we play are not developed by (a professional musician), but rather an amateur who really wants to get better at their playing, and loves the instrument and the camaraderie."

The event will culminate in a final concert, open to the public, in the university's Memorial Hall tonight. The recital will feature Sotto Voce, as well as ensembles by the festival's 20 participants.

"I imagine it to be a two, two-and-a-half hour concert of 'tuba heaven'," Forbes said. "This'll be a spectacle in and of itself."

So how does an all-tuba orchestra sound? "The pedals of a pipe organ would be the most accurate description – or an all-male choir. You'll feel your intestines rumble a little bit – in a good way."